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EDITOR'S PICK URGENT

Federal rule would complicate planners' lives

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John J. Watkins, file, The Times

Traffic is shown on the Borman Expressway (I-80/94), in Gary. Transportation planning for the Region could become much more complicated if a federal rule remains in force.

A new federal rule that would significantly complicate the operations of many of the nation's regional transportation planning organizations, including the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, has become official policy despite protests from across the country.

The rule requires a single transportation plan in U.S. Census-defined urban areas. Two of NIRPC's three counties, Lake and Porter, are in the Chicago IL-IN urban area, most of which is served by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

The plans that would require common documents include long-range ones as well as the constantly evolving Transportation Improvement Programs that detail local projects intended for federal assistance.

The complexities don't end with NIRPC and CMAP's overlap in the Chicago urban area. CMAP extends into part of the Round Lake Beach-McHenry-Grayslake IL-WI urban area, part of which is served by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

And NIRPC's third county, LaPorte, contains most of the Michigan City-Laporte, IN-MI, urban area, where Michigan areas are served by the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Protests about the rule's implications during the federal comment period had some officials hoping the rule would be dropped.

"I thought we had the thing fairly well knocked down," Chesterton Town Councilman Jim Ton, who chaired NIRPC in 2016, said at a commission meeting last week.

But the U.S. Department of Transportation agencies managing the rule's implementation wrote that they had "considered the potential impacts cited by commenters ... and decided the benefits of the rule in terms of comprehensive, unified decision making in the transportation planning process outweighed such potential impacts."

The department did offer a concession in the form of a waiver, if the waiver is supported by the impacted metropolitan planning organizations and the governors of their states, and if the justification for it is approved by the Secretary of Transportation. But CMAP called that "a high bar" to clear.

Full compliance with the rule is well in the future — two years after publication of the 2020 U.S. Census' determination of urban areas, likely 2024, according to CMAP. Local officials hope it will be reversed before then.

"With all of the changes that seem to be coming in Washington, D.C., we're not sure how that rule could be affected," LaPorte Mayor Blair Milo, who chairs NIRPC's Legislative Committee, said at last week's meeting.



NIRPC celebrates 50 years of building up the Region